# History Lesson: Once A Thriving El Monte School...

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HISTORY LESSON: ONCE A THRIVING EL MONTE SCHOOL, DISTRICT BASEYARD PLAYED KEY ROLE IN CONTROVERSIAL DAM PROJECT

Maybe it was when he saw the divots gouged in the concrete just past the three-tiered steps. It may well have been when he gazed up at the empty tower and wondered whether there ever had been a bell penduluming there. Or was it when he deciphered the scrimshaw-like graffiti carved in the ancient red brick wall?

Whenever and whatever it was, as he walked around the District’s Baseyard at Whittier Narrows, Alex Martinez was hooked. History had latched onto him like a melody you can’t get out of your mind. He wanted to know the origins, the backstory, of the Baseyard. He knew that all the buildings and land now used by the District for maintenance, surveying, communications, carpentry and storage had once been used for something else.

Martinez decided to go exploring—in time, not space.

By the time his research was finished, he knew those holes had once held bolts anchoring ante-proscenium seats in a small theater where students performed plays and musicals. The tower indeed had housed a bell, which tolled for class periods and other important events. The graffiti had come later, in the 1940s after the original school had closed, during a decade whose students had felt compelled, then as now, to leave some record of their passage.

“I just kept thinking there was something behind it all,” Martinez says. “I thought it was significant. I thought if more people knew about it, they’d come out and say, ‘Hey, so this is what that was!’”

The Baseyard itself seems a pastoral throwback in a District thoroughly enmeshed in 21st century technology. Except for the 50 or so team members who work out of its acreage every day, few District employees ever make the 15-mile drive to S. El Monte, due east of downtown L.A. But all the GPS devices, tele-engineering, CAD blueprints and Web-based commo would be only so many toys without the nuts-and-bolts support from the Baseyard operations. Its missions include maintenance, engineering, information management, radio, survey, soils, environmental construction, water data control and a Los Angeles projects office.

All SoCal dam tenders are headquartered at the Baseyard, and all the region’s heavy equipment is parked there. Terry Wotherspoon, a 31-year Corps veteran, has been chief of operations and maintenance at the Baseyard since 1996. “I love it,” he says. “It’s quiet, not as hustle-bustle as downtown.”

Like Martinez, Wotherspoon began to notice he was a modern witness to history when several elderly residents asked if they could walk through what once had been their elementary school.

That school was Temple Grammar (or Elementary), and it was the oldest in southern California, founded in the early 1850s. It was “a simple one-room mud and willow-wattle structure located on the banks above the Rio Hondo and boasting an enrollment of 15 pupils during its first year of existence,” according to an online history of El Monte by Jack Barton.

Just after the turn of the 20th century, the El Monte Union High School District was formed, according to Barton’s history. It operated out of a single upstairs classroom in the old Lexington Ave. Grammar School, and the high school enrolled 12 to 15 students. Within a few years, the high school had its own campus and an enrollment of 65 students.

The Temple K-8 School, at the corner of Santa Anita and Durfee, was named after the Walter Temple family, some of the area’s early settlers who started a big ranch on Potrero Grande Hill. Mike Shively, whose father was superintendent of the district for 30 years, was a student at Temple. He recalls that the school drew enrollment from a largely farming community and had 500 to 600 students at its peak. “There was a pretty nice auditorium,” he remembers, “with padded seats and all kinds of functions were held there.”

Oil was discovered in 1921 at the Temple Hills, according to a history of South El Monte. “With the help of taxes from the rich oil wells, the olds school building was enlarged and a cafeteria and auditorium added. Tennis courts were built. The contract price of building was sixty-eight thousand dollars. More ground was secured and a teacher’s cottage added to the north edge. The entire grounds were beautifully landscaped. Eastern educators were brought out to see the Model School of the Country.” School officials agreed to name it after Mr. Temple after he donated a 100-

foot-tall., $600 flag pole brought in by rail from Chicago.

In 1941, Temple’s 8th grade class posed for a photo, now displayed at La Historia Society in El Monte. Twenty-nine students and two teachers are shown. “The barrios of Las Flores, Canta Ranas and La Mision attended there,” the museum caption declares. And 13 years before Brown v. Board of Education, one of the 8th-graders was black.

When Shively was in 4th or 5th grade, the school was forced to relocate—around 1949. And that’s when the Corps of Engineers moved in. “They claimed eminent domain,” says Ernie Gutierrez, El Monte’s mayor and a major supporter of the Hispanic museum society.

Fred Love, who spent 20 years as head of maintenance and operations for the Rosemead High campus and 13 more as an El Monte city caretaker, was also an historian for the El Monte Historical Museum. He says that after World War II, the Los Angeles District bought the land on which the Temple school sat and the school moved to the corner of Tyler Ave. and Potrero. The immediate area “dates back to the building of the San Gabriel Mission in 1771 on the west side of the Rio Hondo River,” Love relates.

After World War II, the school became part of the backdrop for one of southern California’s most ferocious postwar political battles, pitting the Corps and its flood control efforts against many El Monte residents and a young congressman named Richard Nixon. The dispute raged for several years in the late ‘40s, as the Corps tried to implement the Whittier Narrows Dam project, which it deemed vital to protect the lives and property of those living in the rapidly expanding region.

Following deadly floods in the 1930s, the Corps had created an ambitious flood control plan for the Los Angeles County Drainage Area (the now-famous LACDA). Initially a single-purpose flood control project, LACDA was later expanded by the Los Angeles District to include multipurpose functions, including water conservation, irrigation, municipal and industrial water supplies, pollution abatement, hydroelectric power, navigation, fish and wildlife and recreation.

Despite the Corps’ best intentions, many people in the areas that would be affected by Whittier Narrows opposed the location, scale and overall impact of the dam on their livelihoods and neighborhoods. In 1947, for instance, an Anti-Whittier Narrows Dam Assn. of San Gabriel Valley claimed support from Garvey, Rosemead, San Gabriel, Bassett, Puente and El Monte. A year later, prominent produce grower Pearson Bros. Inc. wrote then Sen. William Knowland, “We as residents and taxpayers in this district strongly protest the building of a dam in this area.”

Shively, the onetime Temple student, remembers Nixon sitting in his family’s living room, discussing the Whittier Narrows issue. “My dad went back to Washington about it,” he says. “He was friends with Nixon.” Dean Shively, the superintendent of Temple School District, hosted a 1947 rally “concerning this menace that threatens your home.”

Harold Pearson, a leading El Monte farmer, wrote his family from Washington, D.C., about efforts to defeat the Corps’ original blueprint. “(Nixon) is working with us, and our case looks better all the time,” Pearson wrote. “He looked at our pictures, maps and briefs today, and says we’ve really done a swell job preparing our case.” (Pearson also wrote that he sneaked downstairs in their hotel for a dish of peaches and an orange juice, but “don’t like the water here so don’t drink any more than I have to.”)

Headlines in San Gabriel Valley newspapers chronicled the conflict: “Senate Rejects Whittier Dam Plan”; “El Monte Wins Victory in Capital”; “El Monte Locks Horns with Army Engineer in His Claims on Whittier Narrows Plan.” Some folks got postcard solicitations reading, “I’m in the ‘Dam’ Fight.” (Curiously, a radio program hosted by Nixon and featuring several visiting dam opponents, started off with an anti-communist rant by Whittier’s city attorney, Thomas Bewley, also Nixon’s law partner. Bewley referred to a U.S. Bureau of Standards official “as an unsafe security risk due to some of his associations, particularly with Communist foreign agents.”)

Finally, on March 18, 1948, a headline blared: “Reach Whittier Dam Compromise; Will be South of Original Location.” The Corps had agreed to move the proposed dam about 1.75 miles south of its original site. “End of 12-year Bitter Battle Hailed as Victory for El Monte,” declared a local newspaper.

The first construction bids were opened Feb. 28, 1950, by District Engineer COL W.D. Luplow from the District headquarters at 751 S. Figueroa, just around the corner from today’s HQ. Putting the best face on the years of controversy, District historian Anthony Turhollow had only this to say about Whittier Narrows, citing the first-ever use of a “slip-form paver” which operated on rails and “eliminated the need for headers and paved continuous strips up to 60 feet in width.”

At the Nov. 12, 1955, Whittier Narrows Dam dedication ceremony, Sens. Thomas Kuchel and William Knowland both spoke, as did the assistant secretary of the Army for public works, George H. Roderick. The event ended with a jet

flyover. Nixon was vice president of the United States.

By then the Corps had been using the old Temple school acreage as its base of operations for the dam, and later converted many of the buildings to the uses seen today.

The principal’s office is now used for storage; Tony Masoe has what was once a nurse’s station; a grassed-in area once held a kindergarten class; the cafeteria is now a book storage room and carpenter shop; original hardwood floors are covered with industrial carpet; a hallway drinking fountain still features the original orange and red tile behind it; a teacher’s workroom now holds the commo gear; and many team members’ offices contain the original blackboards from classrooms.

As Alex Martinez strolls around the grounds, he can almost smell the chalk dust. He can almost feel the corduroy grid of the erasers. He can almost hear the recess cries of “Tag! You’re it!” Says Martinez softly: “I wonder what that wall was for. What did this look like when there were kids walking down it? I got interested in everything about this place.”

As Fred Love, the 73-year-old historian recalls: “In 1851 this was what the pioneers were looking for—98% of them were farmers, and after crossing the Cucamonga Desert, a tremendous distance with nothing but heartache, they were looking for the oasis at the end of the rainbow.”